Cursive Italic NEWS

The Barchowsky Report on Handwriting

Volume 2 No 3



Special issue, published to coincide with the sixth working seminar of Association Typographique Internationale in Hamburg 1985

From the Editor:

The Ministry of Education in Iceland is introducing italic handwriting in schools. That is the result of pressure from teachers who were dissatisfied with the style they had, a copperplate-based business hand.

A group of Icelandic teachers who are interested in experimental teaching of italic formed a working party last year, They were interested in the method and asked Briem to put together instructions that could be used with children by teachers who had little or no experience with italic.

The members of the working party initially paid for the printing out of their own pockets. Dr. Gunnlaugur S.E. Briem donated his work. The scheme has been very well received. Letters of support have come in from handwriting experts in many parts of the world, Education authorities in other countries have suggested collaboration.

This year the Icelandic method was cited for excellence by the New York Type Directors Club. It is now on exhibit at the Leipzig Book Fair under the banner "Best designed books from all over the world". The French Ministry of Education has recently brought out a large study, compiled by Jean Larcher, (*Les Outils de l'Ecriture leurs Usages Sociaux*. Comité sur l'Ecriture, Ministere de l'Education Nationale, Paris, 1985) on excellence in lettering. It shows only one example on the teaching of handwriting to children, the Icelandic method.

Nan Jay Barchowsky

Visit the Barchowsky Fluent Handwriting site
<bfhhandwriting.com>

The Icelandic Method

Cursive Italic
NEWS
The Barchowsky Report on Handwriting

The Icelandic system is in three parts. The first is a set of teaching aids that deal with a movement-based approach to italic. A substantial part of them is shown in this issue. It is supported by a computer program for children and a slide lecture with a voice tape for the teachers. The second is a set of copybooks for various stages of skill. The third, still in progress, is a repair manual. It deals with analysis of handwriting problems and their remedies.

I thank Rosemary Sassoon, who knows more about teaching handwriting to children than practically anybody. I thank Charles Lehman, whose expertise on the structure of presentation and curriculum has been invaluable in this project. I thank Liliane Lurçat for her fascinating discourse on development of motor skills in children. I thank Alan Swanson, who gave up large chunks of his London vacation to edit my text.

The method of teaching italic that is shown in this issue is used in selected schools in Iceland. It is run by the Working Party for Experimental teaching of Italic Handwriting and coordinated by Mrs Hilda Torfadóttir.* It is a part It is a part of a Ministry of Education scheme for the introduction of italic handwriting in Iceland.

London, 30 August 1985.

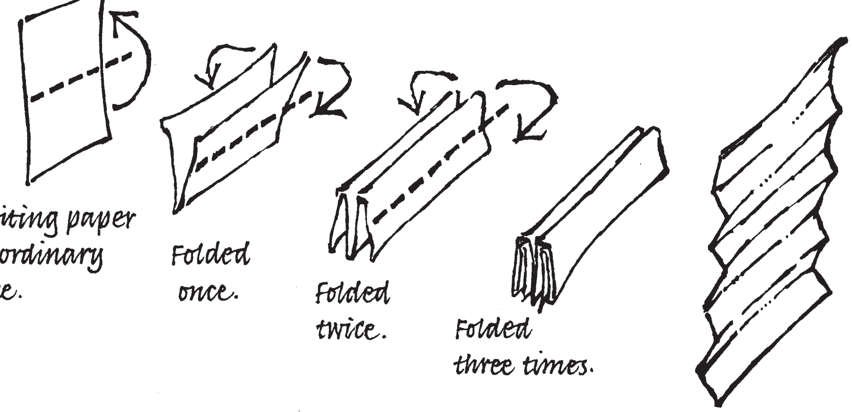
Love. Briem

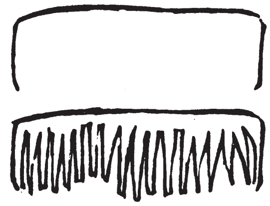
* If you have comments on our project or our approach to it, we would like to hear from you: operina@gmail.com

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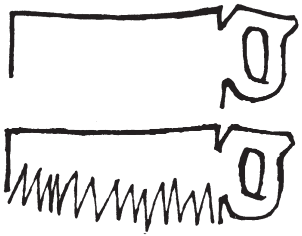
The start

Here's your very first exercise. It is important. For most of the children, it is their first opportunity to train their hands for writing. It will also show you immediately how far their motor skills are developed and what their specific needs are.





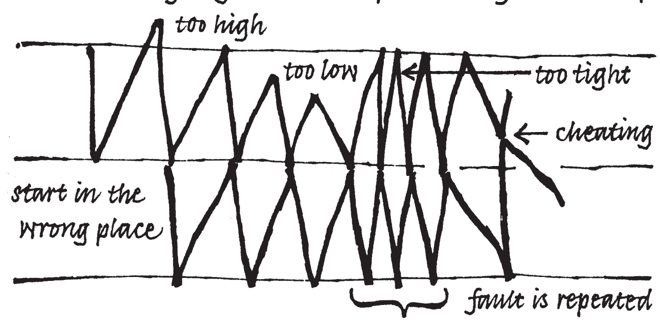
Teeth in combs and saws make easy zigzag exercises.



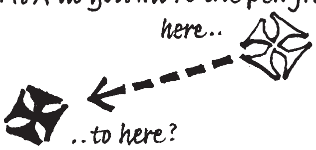
Begin by demonstrating to the class how to fold a sheet three times. Ordinary typing paper is fine. When you open the folds, you have divided it in eight horizontal areas, each just under four centimetres high (that's about an inch and a half).

Next, on the blackboard, show them what to do. They should fill the area between the top fold and the second fold with zigzags. The pattern should be as even as possible. The top points should go high enough to touch the top fold. They should not go above it. The same goes for the lower points. They should stop on the second fold.

Some faults that you may expect from this exercise.



How do you move the pen from



Look at the point you're going towards. (When you try to catch a ball that has been thrown at you, you look at it as it flies through the air, not at your hands.) Let the pen hand find its own way. Try this out a few times and you'll see what I mean.

If the first exercise is too difficult, call in the Martians.



Now, show the children how to make the second line. It is the same as the first, except that this time the top points of the second line should touch the lower points of the first. One line follows another until the sheet has been filled.

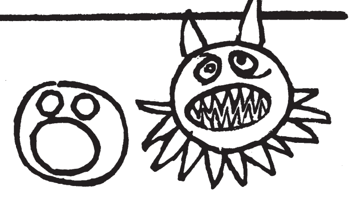
While the children are working, walk about in the classroom and watch how they go about it. You must make sure that all of them understood what you asked them to do. You may expect to have to explain the exercise a few times: making the

HOW TO TRACE

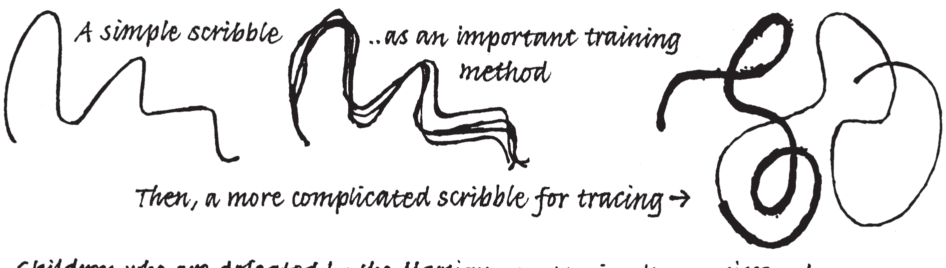


texture as even as possible and the lines all the way to the folds but not across them. Please remind them that they should not hurry.

Some of the children will not master the exercise the first time they try. Explain it again at the blackboard and let them give it another try. You will soon see who needs help. Next, introduce them to the Martian. He is easier. The teeth should be carefully drawn. They can be long or short but they must all be unmistakably in his mouth. The collar must touch his head. Some children have to draw Martians in droves before the can finish and be done with the zigzag exercise that we began with.



The making of a Martian



Children who are defeated by the Martian can try simpler exercises. They can probably draw teeth into a saw or teeth into a comb. But what can you do for a child that cannot even trace his own zigzags? He may be bright and sharp, even if the the coordination of his hand and eyes is terrible. He'll need some encouragement from you first of all. His exercise should be made into a game. Let him make a simple scribble of his own and trace it in various colours. After a few successful attempts, you can ask for a more complex scribble. From there, work towards combs, saws and Martians.

When you have taken your pupils through the pen skills exercises, you have taught them a great deal. They now know how to aim the pen and take it to a point where they want it to go. They have learned how to trace. Most important, they have now seen what kind of work you will expect of them as you teach them how to write.



A merry Martian

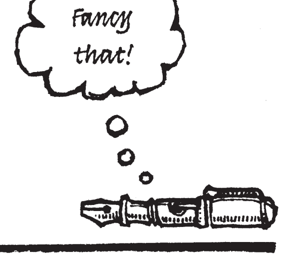
Imagine

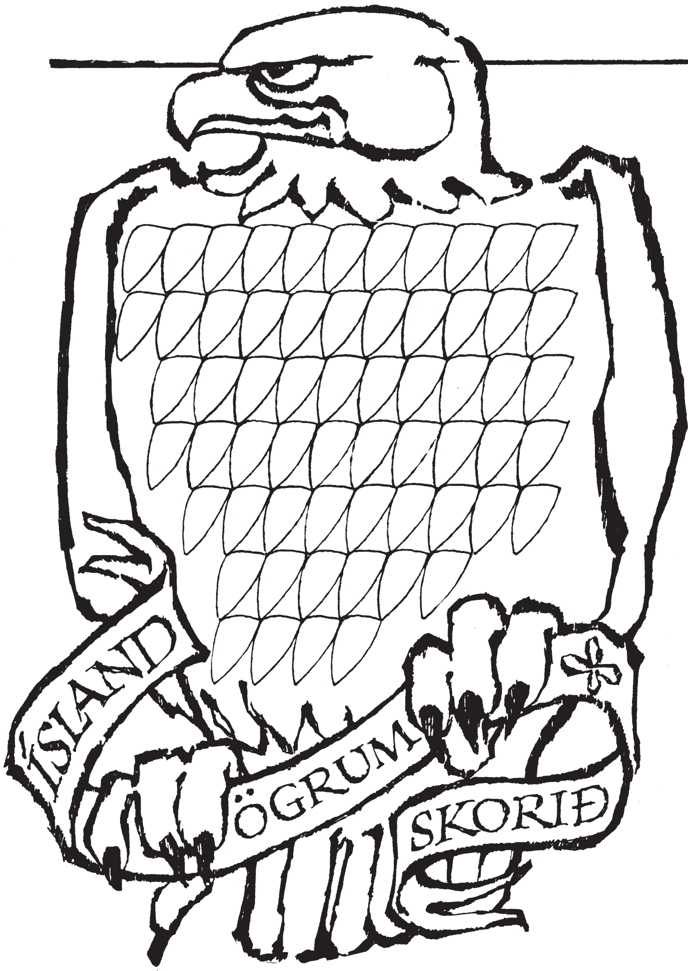
Imagine that you are beginning to learn to write. You would agree that it is a complicated business. You have to make sense of an alphabet that is unfamiliar to you. Where are you supposed to begin? How exactly are you supposed to handle a pen?

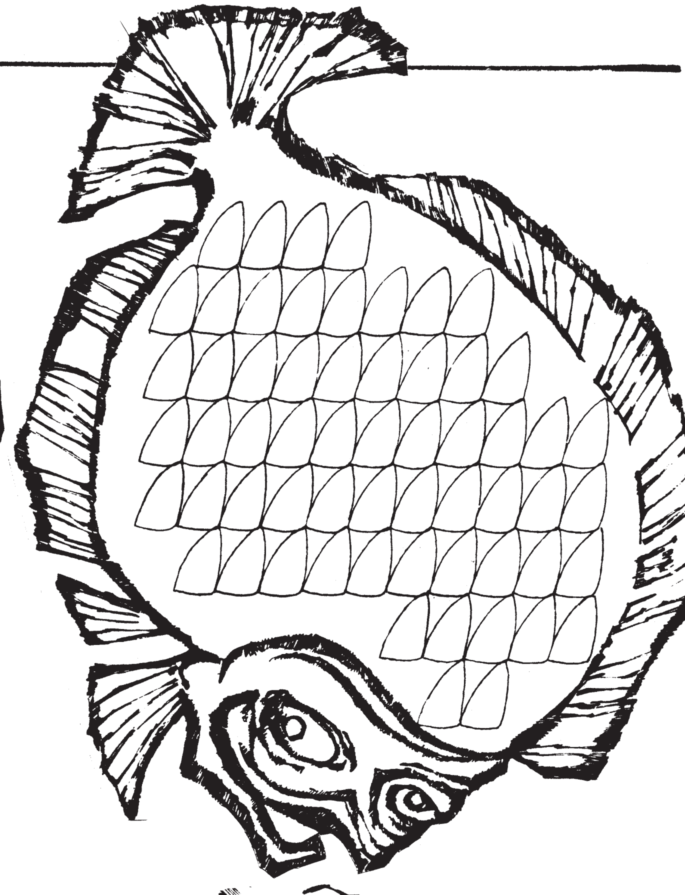
What do you do when something goes wrong? You compare your writing with the model to see where the difference lies. Not only that, you also have to understand what you should do differently next time. (If you want to put this to the test, try writing your own name in Arabic for instance.)

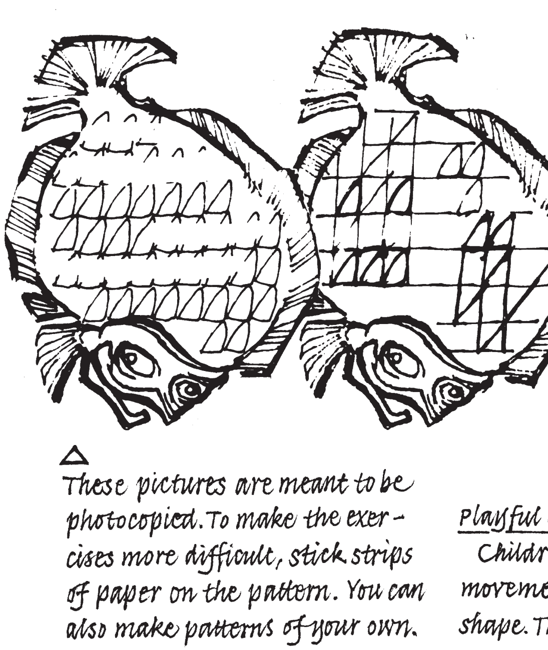
You learn movements by making them. To master a movement, careful repetition is usually more important than understanding the theory. That is how the part of the central nervous system that takes care of movement prefers to learn things.

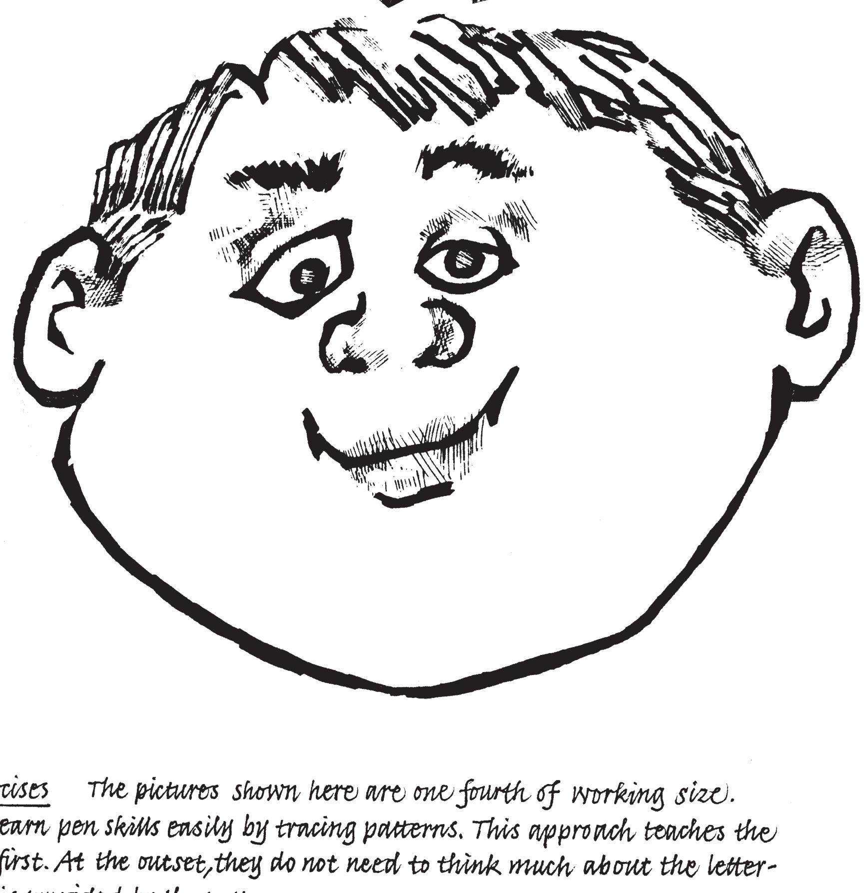
We learn writing by exercise. At the outset, our method uses a lot of tracing, slowly and carefully, again and again. What matters most is the elementary training of hand and eyes. The children need reasonable control over their hands and to develop that, we give them patterns (and later, letters) to trace. That is hard enough. They should not have to struggle with a model alphabet at the same time. They will have plenty of opportunity for that later. At the earliest stage, tracing should be as natural as writing.









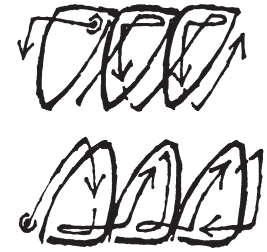


△ These pictures are meant to be photocopied. To make the exercises more difficult, stick strips of paper on the pattern. You can also make patterns of your own.

Playful exercises   The pictures shown here are one fourth of working size.

Children learn pen skills easily by tracing patterns. This approach teaches the movement first. At the outset, they do not need to think much about the letter-shape. That is provided by the pattern.

First skills



Make sure the children use the right movement when they trace the triangles.

The exercises are in two parts. One teaches the first pen skills. Whenever we can, we make it into a game. The other is a set of writing exercises. They are movement-based (on which more elsewhere) and fits groups of letters together by family likeness

Now, let us look at details. First, children must learn to control a pen. (When I say pen, of course I also mean pencil, blackboard chalk, crayon and, if it comes to that, a lump of coal.) Hand control is not as natural to children as people often think. Even many adults have trouble drawing a line from A to B. There are, however, easy ways of teaching it to the children.

The role of the first zigzag exercises is to teach hand control. They also help children develop a sense of form and proportion. Children are delighted to discover that 'from-here-to-here-to-here-and-back-to-there' makes a triangle.

A game. Repetitious movement exercises can be deadly dull. I probably need not tell you how teaching fares when the children yawn, scratch themselves and watch the clock. The exercise pictures are there for photocopying. Use them. Make your own.

Circle. How do you draw a circle? Keep three points in mind. First, you must start at the top. A circle that begins at the bottom doesn't count and please don't let it be shaped like an octopus. Second, it is not finished unless it closes. At a certain age it is not very easy for a child to steer a pencil back to the place where it started. And third, which really is advanced stuff, the circle must be drawn counter-clockwise.

The children who are learning this have enough trouble over right and left, so don't bother with the term counter-clockwise. Here's an easier way: when you draw a circle, think of the pen as an arrow. A right-handed child makes it go forward, a left-hander pulls it back. At this stage, left-handed children need a bit of help. Make sure that they grip the barrel high enough. They cannot see what they are doing if their fingers go into their line of vision when the circle is about to be closed. That's enough at this stage. Later, we'll talk about exercises for writing the round letters: how to make ovals and how to join them.

Photocopy the face of Orville, the fat boy. Children have no end of fun drawing circles on it.

Triangles Drawing feathers on our falcon is a painless way of mastering the a-triangle. (Treat it with respect; it is a national symbol in Iceland. Portly this one may be, but that gives us room for more feathers.) Make sure that the children use the right movement to draw the triangles.

The same goes for the scales of the flounder. Trace them many times. Use colour and try different pens and pencils. The object of these exercises is to teach movements. Tracing allows the child to practise them without worrying about the form at the same time.

You can use the falcon and the flounder in a number of ways. Vary the exercises. When the children have used them for a while, you can make them more demanding and more useful. Stick pieces of paper on the pattern here and there before you photocopy. This way you can alter the task to suit children at different skill levels.



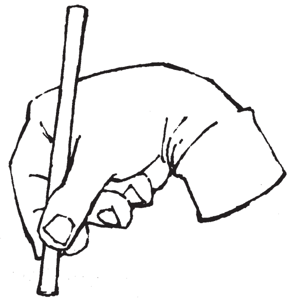


Orville (or, if you prefer, Herbert or Irving or whatever name you like) gets a preposterous skin condition. Sometimes the spots are large and sometimes small. Sometimes they turn yellow and vermilion.

How to hold a pen

Some people will quite happily hold a pen in many strange ways. I do not think that it matters a great deal how you grip it. If you like it and your writing is all right I see no important reason to change it. It is a bit of a novelty to hold the pen the way we do today. Until fifty years ago, most handwriting books taught the copperplate grip: palm down and all four knuckles up.

In my opinion, the most serious consequence of a bad grip is writing cramp. It has been the first consideration in our approach to pen hold.

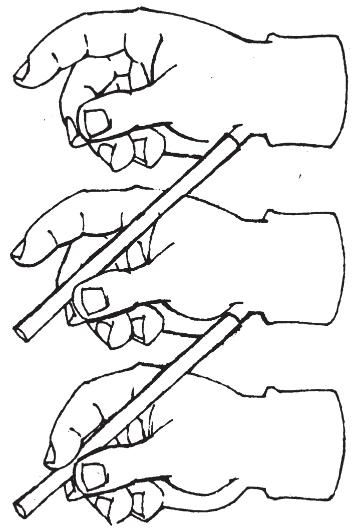


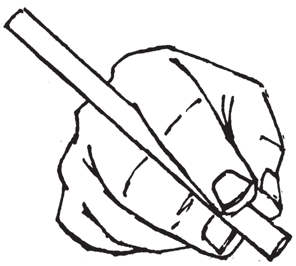
Hooking the wrist is a bad habit. The writing hand should never be above the line.

How to form the primary grip.
First, join the tips of the thumb and middle finger.

Next, put the pen in the cleft between them.

Then, lay the index finger on top of the pen. The index finger pushes against the thumb and middle finger.





Putting the pen between the index finger and the middle finger often helps to get rid of writing cramp.

<u>The primary grip</u> Of course, children do not instinctively know how to hold a pen. Teaching them is your job. Let's look at how you form the primary grip. Relax your hand. Join the tips of the thumb and middle finger comfortably. Put the pen in the cleft between them so that the barrel is close to the knuckle of the first finger. Lay the index finger on the pen. Notice that the index finger pushes against the thumb and middle finger.

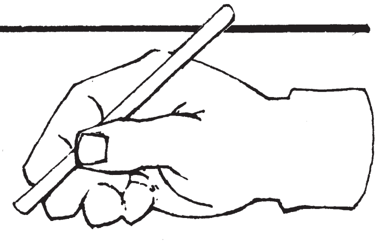
The hand should lie on its side and on the half-curled little finger. The wrist should be more or less straight. The hand should never be above the writing line and write downwards as left-handers often do. We deal with that problem in the section on left-handedness.

To your adult hand, the primary grip will probably feel inflexible. It is meant only for children, who do not yet have higly-developed motor skills. You don't put a seven-year old on a full-sized bicycle.

<u>The grown-up grip</u> As children grow, the proportions of their hands change. Children also begin to write faster and to hold the pen differently.

The grown-up grip is quite different from the primary grip. The thumb is now higher on the barrel and pushes against the first and second fingers. This, however, increases the danger of writing cramp. If that begins, the easiest remedy is to return to the primary grip. The thumb moves down to meet the middle finger and stays there until the cramp has faded away.

The grown-up grip is not convenient for beginners. It is, however, excellent for writing quickly. The hand must have a certain firmness for the grown-up grip to be suitable, but it is only useful in a hand that has developed some discipline.

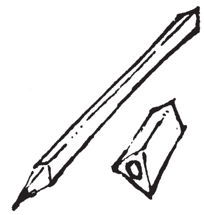


In the grown-up grip the thumb pushes against the first and second fingers.

How to do it Make sure that the children have the right pen hold at the beginning of every class. Of course, some of the less-accomplished children will not retain it for long. That need not worry you. They are all right as long as they know how a proper grip is formed. They can then start using it when they are ready. One bad habit, however, you must stop before it takes hold: the pen barrel must never lie parallel to the thumb. It is not suited to the demanding control of pen movements.

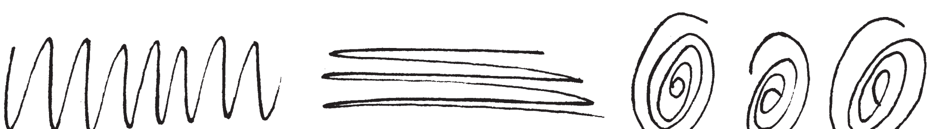
Many children grip the pen so firmly that the fingers bend backwards. This need not worry you. The finger joints of children are very flexible.

Some people recommend that children use thick pencils to begin with. I do not believe this helps. I have yet to see its practical benefit in a classroom. Try it out for yourself: give the children a choice. Of those that I have observed, most chose thin barrels, such as ball point refills.



Triangular pen grips are useful teaching aids.

Always try to keep handy a few triangular vinyl pen grips to slide onto a pen barrel. They are remarkably useful for teaching a good grip. Triangular pencils have their surprises, too. Children don't need these things all the time. In each class there are usually a few who do, and they won't all need them on the same day.



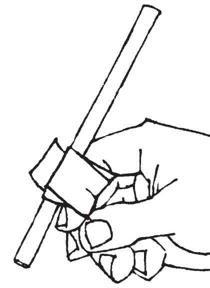
◁
Fast scribble exercises often help reduce writing tension.

Writing cramp is a serious problem. It is caused by misplaced concentration. First, the hand tightens its grip on the pen. Then, the tension spreads up the arm and sometimes affects the muscles of the shoulder and back. When this happens, begin by soothing the child. Remind him from time to time to relax his grip. Make sure the grip is correctly formed, that the tips of the thumb and middle finger form a cleft.

Use fast scribble exercises to loosen the concentration: horizontal and vertical zigzags, spirals to the left and to the right. This can take some time, but it is time well spent. Let the child wiggle his hands. Some suggest that the child stand up for a moment. He should put his palms flat on the desk and bend the fingers back by leaning gently forward on them.

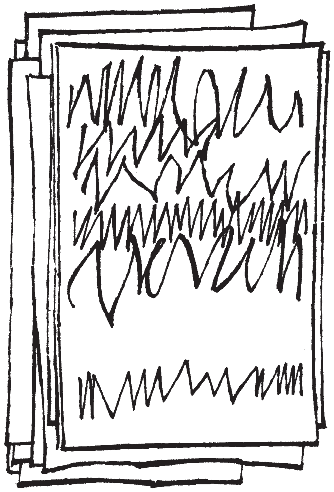
If this is not enough, you can use the between-the-fingers grip. We start as we did with the primary grip. The tips of the thumb and middle finger should fit together comfortably. The pen is then put between the first and second fingers, and the child can begin writing again. This method has given good results. Most children who use it can go on to the grown-up grip with the rest of the class. A few even prefer to keep it.

If other remedies fail, then try the tape method. Let the child form a primary grip, but without a pen. Then, tape the pen to the top of the index finger. (Masking tape is easier to use than cellophane tape.) Of course, this won't do for long, but this way it is possible to cut through the problem. At this stage, the tension and feelings of incompetence are often more difficult to deal with than the mechanics of the grip itself. But keep in mind that the tape method must be used as a game rather than a punishment. Children who suffer this kind of stress often need medical help.



The tape method can help in severe cases of writing cramp.

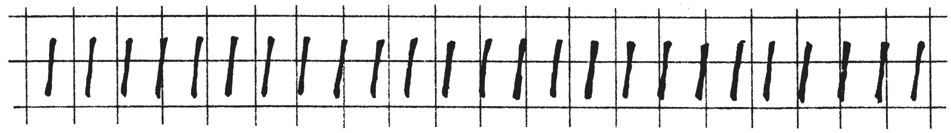
Writing



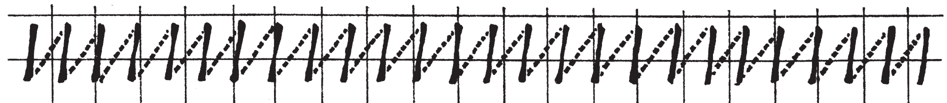
As a writing exerise, this is worthless. It is all right for practising the first pen skills but not very useful after that. At the next stage, the writing exercises, uneven zigzags that slant in any direction teach nothing.

Tell the children not to hurry. A few lines of careful writing can make a big difference. Pages of scribble are wortless.

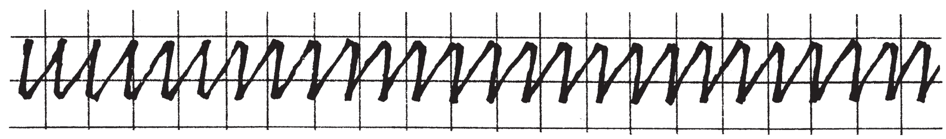
The business hand that italic is to replace has a difficult movement pattern. Our method of teaching italic is built on a movement pattern that is very easy to master.



The downstrokes support the letters. They should slant slightly and be as even as a picket fence. In the zigzags that follow, the downstrokes are much more important than the upstrokes.



The right kind of upstroke comes automatically when the downstrokes are connected without lifting the pen. On the whole, the upstrokes take care of themselves if you take care of the downstrokes.



This zigzag is more demanding than the first one (when we used folded paper). The downstrokes should all have the slant, they should be of the same height and they should be evenly spaced on the line.



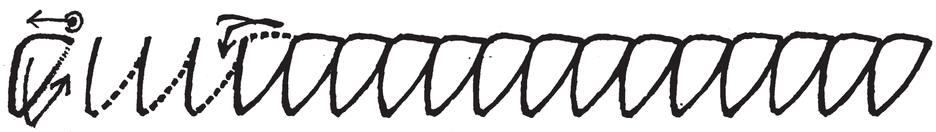
Fluent italic is remarkably close to the humble zigzag.

The earlier exercises trained the hand and the eyes to work together. They dealt with the discipline that is necessary before writing. When you have gone through them, you are ready for the next stage.

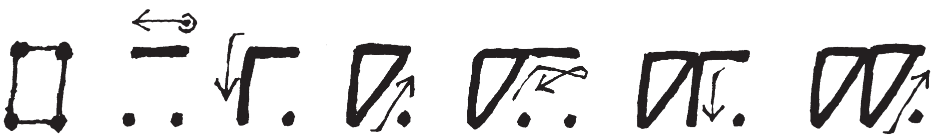
The writing exercises come next. You still use the zigzag, which should have an even texture and must be written slowly. The slant matters; the downstrokes should tilt a bit to the right, perhaps five or ten degrees. It is important to make the upstrokes as connections between downstrokes. Later, the upstrokes take on an important role, both as letterforms and joins. It is a good idea to get them right at this stage. How much they slant depends on the distance between the downstrokes. (More distance, more slant; less distance, less slant.)

Use paper with lines or a grid. For children who have a lot of trouble at this point, make photocopies of the illustration of the exercise. Let them go on tracing until they have mastered the skill. The exercises are about to turn into writing and none of your pupils must get into a dead end here.

The backbone of italic is an even zigzag. (Of course, we don't expect a mature hand to look like the grin of a crocodile. We'll soften the forms as we go on.) The movement pattern is simplicity itself. We can make most of the characters merely by nudging the hand movements towards the letterforms.



<u>The second writing exercise</u> Now we make letterforms. This is almost the same exercise as the first. We are going to make triangles. You must make sure that everybody gets the movement right. (It's a common error to start from the left. The margin illustration shows the right way and the wrong way. This is easy to spot if you watch the children writing. You might miss it if you look only at the writing when it's finished.)



<u>Arrighi's box</u> This is Ludovico Vicentino degli Arrighi's marvellous key to italic. The slightly bent rectangle is a useful teaching aid. Memorize it. How much does it tilt? What is the proportion between width and height? The illustration shows you how to make triangles that look much like the stuff in the second exercise. The method is 450 years old and still the best.

Let the children write pages of triangles. (Yes, they do look like dentures.) Use the falcon and the flounder. That is what they are for. Remind the children that this is still a kind of zigzag. Tell them frequently not to hurry.



adgq uyæ

The a-triangle is the basis of four letters. Three others, including the Icelandic a-e ligature, might be called near relatives. We can already make a few words from the letters we have gone into: dad dug a quad.

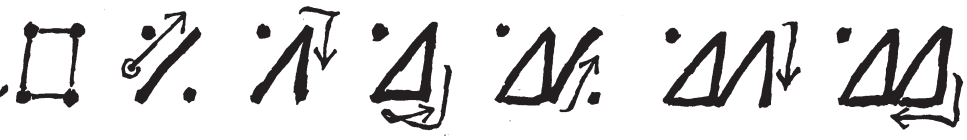
Farai dal primo tratto grosso & piano questo corpo ◦ - r ◦ dal
quale ne cavi poi cinque littere
a d c g q
Dele quali lre tutti li corpi che tocano la linea sopra
la quale tu scri
uerai,
se hanno
da
formare
in
vno quadreto oblongo
et
non quadro perfetto in tal modo
cioe □ ∴ r. ◦. a ◦. c. d g ∷ q □
a d c g q

Our method, by and large, was in use in the sixteenth century. In 'La Operina', Arrighi says: Make this shape ◦ - r ◦ from the first stroke, the broad and horizontal one. From it you get five letters, a d c g q. In them, the part that stands on the line should be made to fit in an oblong rectangle, not a square, like this: □ ∴ r. ◦. a ◦. c. d g :: q □, a d c g q.



Right way Wrong way

Vltra le' retro=
scritte' cinque' littere' a c d g q
ti fo intendere'
che' anchora quasi tutte' le' altre' lre'
se' hanno á formare' in questo :: qua=
dretto oblungo et non quadro per
fetto □
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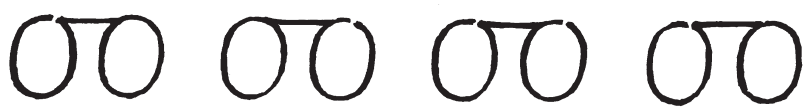


b p þ m n h k r

The third exercise teaches the **b**-triangle family. It is similar to the second, except that it is upside-down and has a different movement pattern. Again, we use the box. Beginning in the right place is important. Three letters, if we include the Icelandic letter þ (the thorn) are based on it. The family extends to five more letters. We let the children copy this until they have grasped the general idea. Whenever a child seems to need a reminder of calm, steadfast writing movement, go back to the flounder.

<u>Ideal proportions</u>. Arrighi continues: 'Most of the other letters, not just a c d g q, should fit an oblong rectangle □, but not a square. In my eyes the chancery hand should be based on an ellipse rather than a circle; but that is what you get if you base it on a square rather than an oval.'



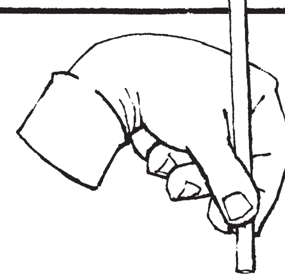


o ð c e t s

The fourth exercise deals with ovals. They should have the same slant as the box. The relationship between their width and height is the main stumbling block for children. One way of sorting out this problem is to write the oval on top of a zigzag. This gives it proportions that fit the other characters and takes care of the slant at the same time. Joining exercises give the best results when the ovals are written in pairs.

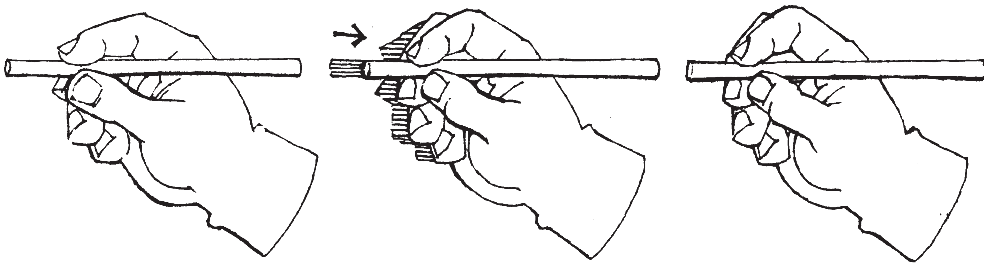
We base two letters directly on the oval and three others on it in part. (One of them is the **c**, which Arrighi preferred to make from the **a**-triangle.) The letter s is usually a special case but the oval helps give it a framework.

Lefthandedness



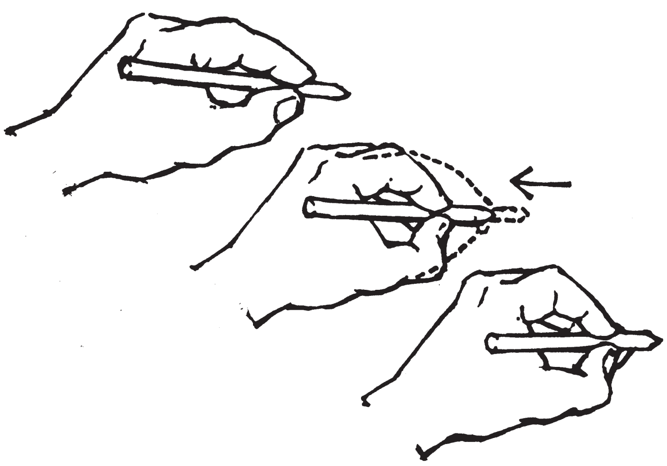
The pen hand should never be above the line of writing.

The development of writing has been greatly influenced by the right hand and what it did best. Both the slant and many of the letterforms fit the swing of the wrist as the right hand moves. However, in the teaching of handwriting, the needs of left-handed children must be taken into account. They have been ignored too long.

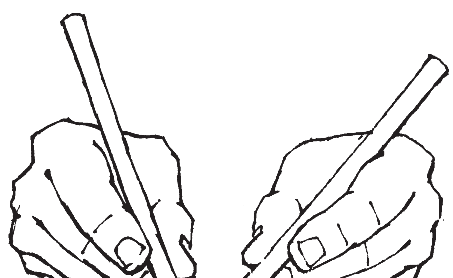


◁ For a six-year old the most difficult of all handwriting movements is to bend the thumb, index finger and middle finger at the same time.

The pen stroke that gives right-handed people the greatest difficulty is down and to the right. (↘) This stroke is a part of many capital letters but has disappeared in the small letters, apart from k and x. There are many better ways of making a straight line than by bending the thumb, index finger and middle finger simultaneously. In fact, it is arguably the worst way.



◁ The slant of normal writing suits the right hand. If the left hand is positioned as a mirror-image of the right, it has to make all the downstrokes by pulling, which is the most difficult movement of all.



A left-handed pen hold should not be a mirror-image of a right-handed one. In the left hand, the pen should have greater slant and be gripped higher on the barrel.

When the left hand writes from left to right, it tends to smudge the half-dried ink. Many left-handed people put the pen hand above the line and write downwards. This is an awkward position and a frequent cause of writing cramp.

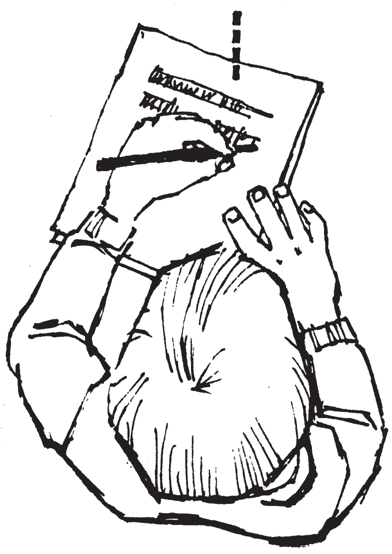
<u>Correct pen hold</u> The fingers should grip the barrel as described in the section on pen hold. But as the grip of a left-handed writer differs from that of a right-hander, other considerations come into play. For left-handers, the pen should be at less of an angle to the paper and the fingers farther from the tip.

When left-handed children look at the pen in their hand, they should see it nearly sideways. The right-hander sees it almost end-on.

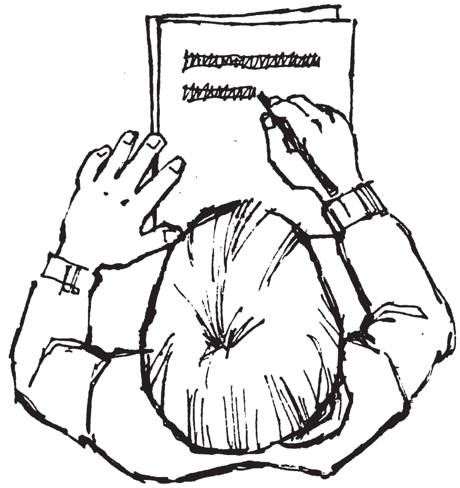
Paper position Right-handed children should have the sheets* right in front of them. It is important that the paper never be put so far to the left that the pen hand conceals the first letters of each line.

A left-handed child, however, should put the paper to the left. Then the pen hand will not conceal the end of each line. If the sheets are too far to the left, concentration becomes more difficult for the child. (The paper should also be at an angle, but I'll explain that in a moment.)

* It is unpleasant to write on a single sheet on a hard table-top. A few leaves of paper make it softer. (To avoid squandering, use paper that has already been written on.)



Left-handed children should learn to put the paper at an angle and to the left. The broken line marks the line of vision.



Right-handed children should put the paper directly in front of them and keep it in place with the left hand.

The ruler-method The hand of a left-handed writer should be just below the line. Then, it will not smudge the ink. The difficult movement of thumb, index finger and middle finger must be avoided.

The best solution that I know is a compromise between paper angle and writing angle. The sheets are turned to the right as the illustration (above) shows. The writing is allowed more backward slant than usual. The natural swing of the wrist can then be used to make the downstrokes. The wrist (as we saw in the chapter on grip) can be kept straight enough to avoid much danger of writing cramp.

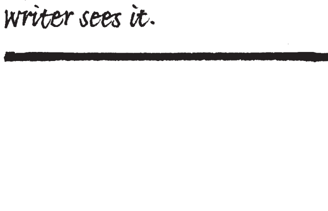
It is easy to teach children the hand position that we have just described. Lay down a ruler (a pencil will do just as well) on the line. The hand should be just below it and the pen nib on it. Then, take the ruler away and begin writing. In a short time the hand will find the right place on its own.



How to use a ruler to teach the correct hand position. The pen nib is on the ruler, the hand below it. Now, remove the ruler.

Light and space A left-handed child needs room for the left arm. When two children sit side by side, the left-handed should be to the left and the right-handed to the right.

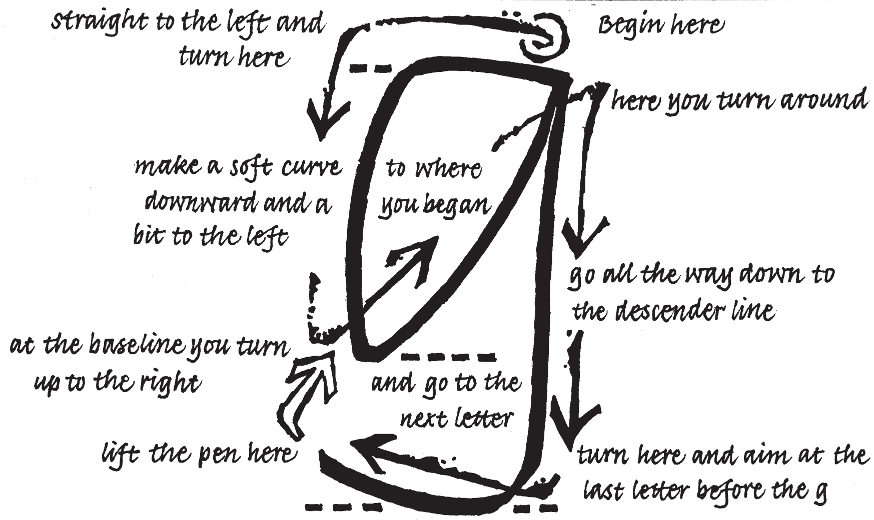
In most classrooms, the desks are arranged so that the light comes from the left. In this situation, the pen hand of left-handed children can cast a shadow on the writing. This position must be avoided if at all possible.



Left-handed pen hold, as the writer sees it.

Ductus The path of the pen

At the outset, letters with a family likeness should be practised together for best results. It is important that the pen follows the right path when it writes the characters.

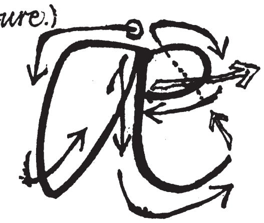


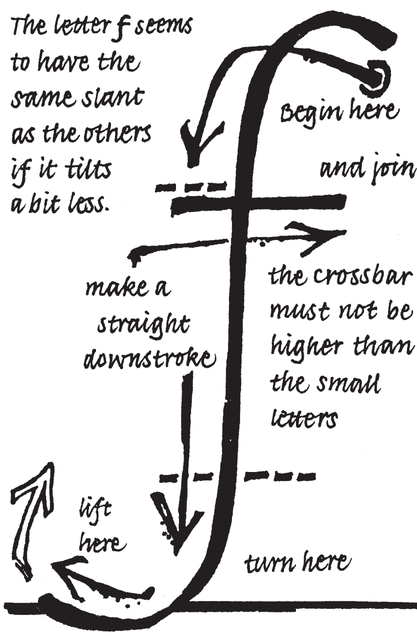
We use the a-triangle in seven letters.

Make the tops of the open letters a bit narrower



(You can probably ignore the a-e ligature.)







Writing an f and a g on top of one another is a good way to practise the descender turn.

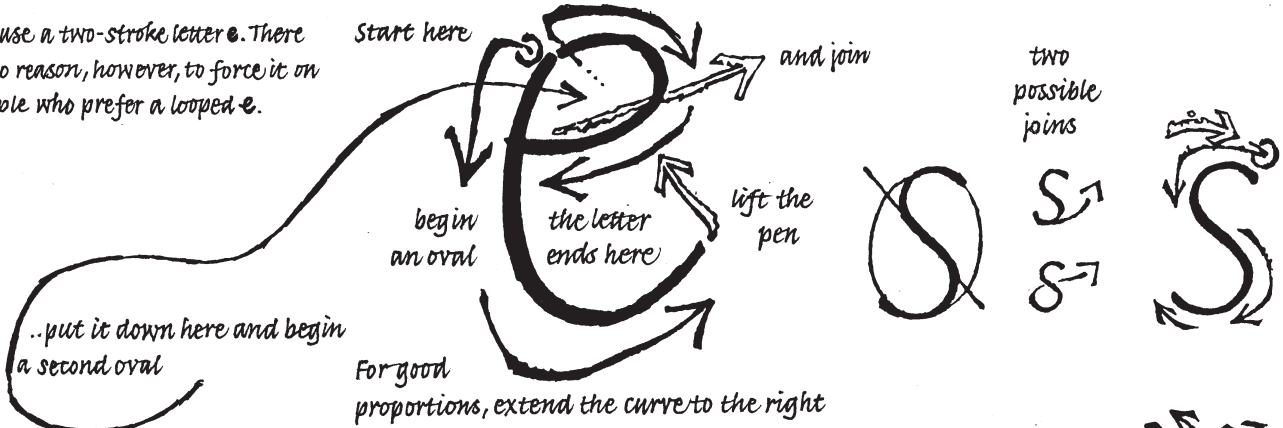


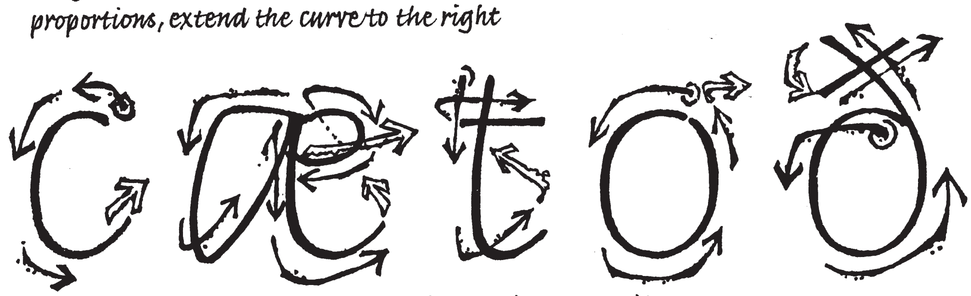
A double-f can be written in many different ways. The letters should not have exactly the same slant.



These characters have a letterform in common

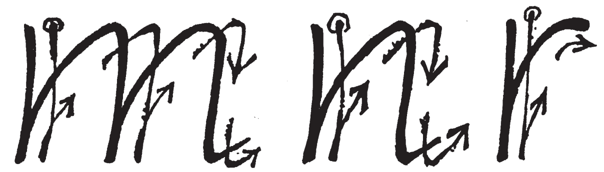
We use a two-stroke letter **e**. There is no reason, however, to force it on people who prefer a looped **e**.





the letter **t** is almost like an **e** with a crossbar instead of a loop

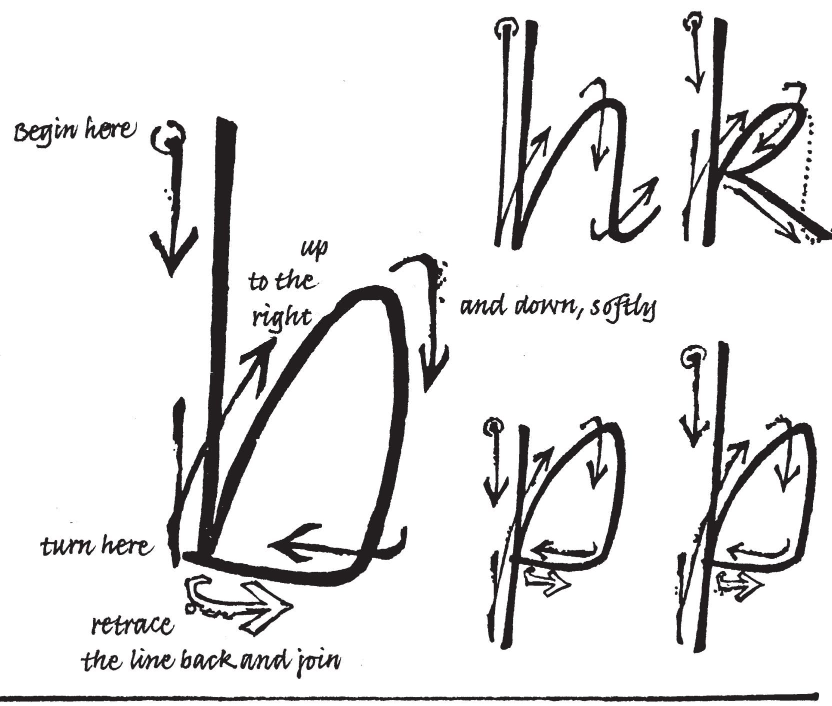
In the characters that are closest to the zigzag movement, it helps legibility a great deal if the letterforms are softened. Then 'minimum' becomes 'minimum.'

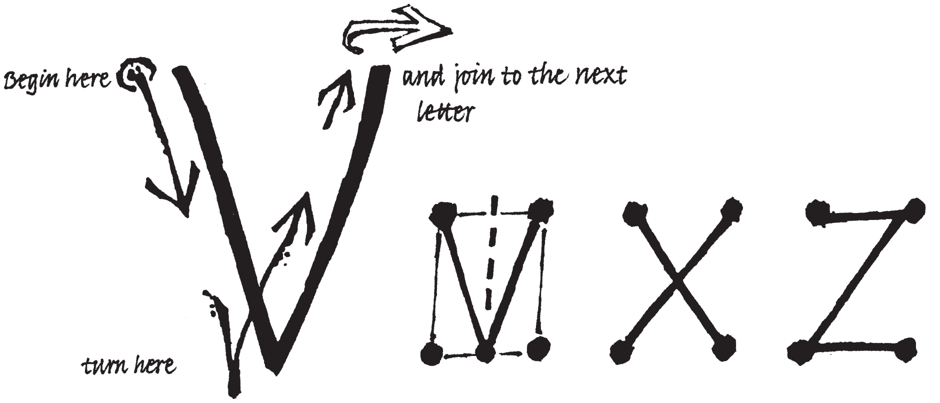


An r is like an unfinished **n**. A **k** is like an **h** with a very tight belt



Of course, the real test of italic will be in the classroom. We'll see. After the fanfare, nothing is more dangerous than the voice of a child that says 'The emperor has no clothes'.





Arrighi's slanting box is a convenient frame for italic. The writing, however, looks best when the frame is not very noticeable.



The letter w is made by writing a v twice over. The two halves should tilt toward one another

abcdðefghijklmnopqrst
uvwxyzþæö ABCDÐEFG
HIJKLMNOPQRSTUVW
XYZÞÆÖ 1234567890

The model

our model alphabet has capitals that are close to classical proportions. But as most writing is in small letters, their shapes matter more. Ours look the way they do because they are meant to be written in a certain way and therefore taught in certain way. They have a simple form because they are based on a simple method.

Our first consideration, however, is not simplicity. The model alphabet is meant for writing and therefore based on movement. Many of the letters have joining hooks. (You'll find one such at the end of an n.) A lengthy study of writing movements suggested that they should be taught from the very beginning.

The model will probably change. We hope to learn new things as we go along.



Skriftaræfingar 2-4

Is the slant right? Is the spacing even? This should look like a slightly tilting ▷ picket fence

Start at the dot and follow the arrows.

bppmnhkrbppm

The wordspace is about right when you can fit the letter i in it. Uneven writing needs wider gaps. ▷ You only make the space ▷▷ a bit wider to fit in a comma or a period.

hrip kimni. brim

mamma þín pabbi þinn

vivace

Fiskurinn hefur fögur hljóð, finnst hann oft á heiðum

Copybook examples

We teach writing as motion. Here, movement exercises lead to letters.

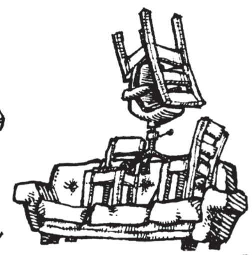
The pages are photocopied and cut into desk strips. Writing models for children must not be high. If they are, the upper part is not very useful.

The letters that you have just written are right in front of you and it is easy to start copying them, instead of the model, without noticing. Be careful not to do that.

It is better to practise different letters from the same family than the same letter over and over. It is better to write a few lines of text than the same line many times.

oðcet sss oðcet sss

 soð eða te? 



set  sess og sæti



(You don't have to write as many letters between pen lifts as the model shows. Three or four are enough.)

fgyjliijfgyjliijfgyjlij

The letter j looks distinctive with a hook on the descender. It can be easier without it, however, especially when you want to write fast.

fyrir kaffi líffræði

Two ways of making a double f ◁

jájá  jújú  jæja

Gunnlaugur SE Briem

Italic

The Icelandic Method

